

On storytelling, setting the human apart

Essay

“Of interest is not particularly the character of things in themselves but
the interpretations about it”
Paraphrasing Epictetus (50-130 CE)

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Abstract

The human experience seems a never ending narrative. Whatever said or thought it takes the form of a report or storyline. Even formal expressions like logic or chemical formulas do not escape that condition. They are narratives under restrictive conditions.

Narration seems a defining feature of the human, enough reason to take a closer look at some characteristics. As it comes down to bringing forth a story rather than offering a one on one depiction, the burning question sounds why should it be taken serious after all? Further: are all stories of the same type and if not in what do these differ?

This contribution wants to offer some reflections on this intriguing subject.

1. The focus on semantics, why?

1.1. *The shared condition*

“It is only our natural prejudice, and that arrogance which made our forefathers declare that they were descended from demi-gods, which leads us to demur to this conclusion.”

Darwin, *The descent...*

(1871/2009, Cambridge - paperback, vol.1. chapter 1; p.32)

However most people accept the theory of evolution proposed by Darwin, few seem fully aware of its ultimate implications. When discussing the theory mentioned, the focus is mainly on heredity, on correspondences on the level of the genome, anatomy, physiology and on behaviour in the sense that behaviour and heuristics between species are getting compared. Rarely if ever the conclusion is getting drawn that the close kinship to other great apes implies that “both”¹ shared a similar understanding of the environment.

In order to finally be able to offer an insight in what changed, it is desirable to get some understanding of that shared or initial condition.

What is the core of that condition?²

There are at least two issues needing to be explained.

¹ “Both” only serves the rhetoric. The ancestors which eventually would evolve into the human species were part of the great apes.

² This has been discussed extensively in other texts such as “The Forgotten Transition” (2018); Building cognition, objectification as linchpin; Beyond the Material Engagement theory; chapters 1 & 2 in the supplement of The forgotten transition etc. The latter contains an inventory of about forty differences.

Firstly, experience is at the core of existing; it is first line. It collapses with it, it is synonymous to it. It could be argued that one is also able to think of experience and in that case thinking comes first. This ignores that thinking is a mode of existence.

The stress on the fact that experience is in an absolute sense first condition will become clear further.

The second principle is about the determinants of behaviour. Nowadays the focus is on the workings of causes hidden deep in the person. Behaviour is often explained by referring to hormonal swings or shortfalls respectively abundance of neurotransmitters and the like. But whatever the effects of deeper situated factors, even if these are decisive for the way the individual understands the world, it is actually the understanding of the world itself which will determine the type of behaviour. Whatever the causes contributing an understanding of the scene experienced as friendly, it will be that experience itself which will raise behaviour accordingly.

Take an animal and for the sake of being able to raise empathy a mammal; it will not ponder the condition of the world but in first instance experience the fluctuations in the environment directly. It will respond to it on the basis of its understanding. Approaching an animal will often result in withdrawal as it will take it as threatening.

In short being alive is equal to a condition of experiencing and that will become coloured by the way the world is understood.³ So far for the most fundamental condition which begs the question into the characteristics?

Here I will only mention a few, be it the most central ones.

The experience is centric, better still egocentric. It is often called the “*umbellicus mundi*”, the navel of the world collapsing with experience. It is primary motivated, meaning providing the drive to act in relation to the fluctuations experienced as relevant. The primary motivation being one dimension in evaluating what is relevant, the other follows from the abilities of the body. Experience is fully dynamic, a constant flux. However the term “consideration” is not appropriate even completely alien in this condition, the comment that in this condition consideration is absent makes it more easy to grasp it. It is iconic in nature. Again not appropriate but adding that there is absolutely no commenting and declaring language. Iconic should not only be understood in the sense of visual. It refers to an “image of the world” brought forth by a confluence of all sensory channels resulting in one compact image. Absence of the stance of consideration and of act of commenting implies a condition of directness. What is relevant will in the experience take foreground while all other details vanish into the background. It is important to realise that this experience of being a world rather than to have a world is taking a here and now dimension. It is bound to the local and the actual; moreover it is collapsing with it.

³ This has been called pragmatic phenomenism; the latter for the world appearing which in fact collapses with the understanding of it- two aspects of the same; this motivating responding behaviour.

The basic – shared – initial condition

| CORE | CHARACTERISTICS |
|---|--|
| Experience raised by the understanding | Centric – egocentric World and experience collapse into one Dynamic Iconic Direct Relevance of stimuli determined by - condition of primary motivation - abilities of the body What is relevant takes foreground |
| instantiating an <i>or</i> collapsing as a here and now dimension | |

This depicts in a simplified version of the condition the last common ancestors shared. Essential is to understand this thoroughly. In this condition there is no question asked into the meaning or the sense of things happening. What is happening is meaningful from the very first moment; what is going on equals making sense. The condition of questioning does absolutely not exist, it does not occur at all. The void provoked or expressed by asking a question is of a very different order altogether. It is not existing in that stage in the same sense a television set did not exist in de Middle Ages and any reference to a contraption like this would absolutely been unthinkable, nonsensical. The same goes for the duality being free versus not being free, of unbound or ungrounded versus bound to the situation at hand. The condition of being free (to make a choice) is a qualification sprouting from a condition which at that time did not exist at all, which in the same way as previous example – the ability to question – could not have been thought of. From the point of view of modern man behaviour in that condition could be considered as being determined in a heteronomous way, that is triggered by internal or external stimuli in contrast to autonomy referring to the ability to take initiative oneself. But again these terms are anachronistic. They are projections from a contemporary frame of reference onto an era in which these conditions did not exist at all hence the terminology is in no way appropriate.

A good understanding is necessary of getting to grips with the different condition which will characterize the later (the actual) human.

1.2. The transition

I have taken effort to elaborate on the previous subject because it is essential to raise an understanding on a condition of pure dynamic existence in which the act of reflection or the stance of consideration is absent in an absolute sense.

It is now the right moment to refer to the transition. This has been extensively discussed in other writings⁴ so I will be brief here.

The transition focuses on the shift from a dynamic existence as described in the previous paragraphs in the direction of a particular way of producing tools bringing forth a reorganisation of the perceptive cognitive organisation. In short it results in a perspective on the world as a set of manipulable objects while the underlying dynamic is that of mediated manipulation. This leads to a stage of development which could be coined the technically skilled hominin. This was not only a case of technical proficiency but went with a change in perceptive cognitive perspective. The reconfiguration of input into an object pattern has been mentioned. But the perspective is about the appreciation of what is perceived as being on a distance. The object perceived is appreciated as being over-there, in front of the perceiver, ready at hand. The angle of perception changed with it into a kind of super-vision, a looking upon, a stance of consideration.

All this is one drastic step away from the hominid but it is not a human yet. That stage follows from a further development which – it should be stressed – is contingent. It happened because the circumstances were favourable for its coming into being but there was no teleological goal forcing it to happen as often suggested.⁵

The factor triggering further development can be summarized by the term “displacement”.

I will now elaborate somewhat on this because it provides the stepping stone into the problem at the core of this contribution: the urge to bring forth narratives in the first place, the difference between full and minimal semantics as the real subject.

The dynamic or mechanic

In order to clarify what it is about a passage from “The Forgotten Transition” will used

“II.1.1.5. Association and displacement

Occurring events result in the organism being aroused and directed towards the centre of the event. By repetition, types of events are becoming associatively coupled with certain types or meaningful contents of arousal. This leads to the effect that a significant detail of an event suffices to activate the global corresponding type of arousal. This is

⁴ The Forgotten Transition (2018); Building cognition: objectification as linchpin; Beyond the Material Engagement Theory; Hand and imagination... to mention some.

⁵ Holloway for instance mentions a social need, groups becoming ever larger. But what about Gelada baboons living in groups of at least five hundred individuals, why was a similar need not occurring there?

quite a trivial mechanism occurring in many species at least those provided with the same type of neural architecture. Man is no exception.

A special property of an aroused state of that kind is that it does not only bear content value restricted to the event itself. Thus the stimulating detail in the event not only announces the event to come, as for example a certain noise announces a so far invisible predator. In fact it reactivates neural correlates of which the specific configuration acquired form during earlier events of similar type. As such, a state of psychic and motor excitement related to events in the past and probably also in another location, are being brought to life. Therefore the naming of such a reactivated state as 'a remembered present' by Edelman is strikingly accurate.

This makes it evidently clear that the actual reactivated state of the organism is in part related to something falling out of the actual context. As such it realises a **displacement in space and time**.

The same is true for the use of means or tools discussed in previous paragraphs. This use is not a bare or cold functional act. The handling of the tool is immersed in meaning i.e. associations with particular experiences of previous manipulative events. As an extreme example, a hammer stone used in a heraldic fight with an enemy is compromised and as such loaded with meaning⁶. The renewed manipulation of that particular tool will always wake some reminiscences of that feat, Edelman's remembered presents.

Associations of that type are not exceptional. They are equally present in the dog seeing the boot which caused him harm in the past. It will result in a state of fear, withdrawal and a furious reaction.

The uniqueness of the human situation lies in the fact that associations of this type can become coupled to means with an "object"-character as previously described in the case of the stone tool with the flaked rim. In situations of that kind associations do not only *happen* to the individual. By the detached character of the object the manipulating individual can instigate the associative state himself. Formulated differently, **by use of the mediating object he can provoke the displacement himself** without being fatefully forced to it by the contextual circumstances. At this very point, self-induced imaginativity germinates.

⁶ As a matter of fact, this situation makes part of a second layer of meaning. Any tool is a natural index of its use as Byers (1994) observes. In that sense, a particular type of tool is used in a specific context (hunting and butchering for instance and the preparation of meat for the group meal) composing what could be considered a first-line meaning. But apart of that referred to here are specific events and occasions which are contingent. An unexpected fight in which an enemy was killed for instance adds an extra layer of meaning. In "Hands and Imagination" the levels of meaning have been dealt with in more detail. It is offered here as a note in the margin not changing the line of thinking of the actual problem at hand. The first level is based on the relevance of some input in relation to the condition of the primary motives. The second – easily overlooked – level is determined by the type and the construction of the body. For the human the position, the abilities and the function of the hands are at the heart of the way the human will approach and understand the world. The third level rises from the tool supporting action, the tool having a dedicated function and task (a sharp rim is for cutting). The fourth level is based on association. Much later in the development two more levels can be discerned. The fifth level is meaning by stipulation (verbally defining) and the sixth is meaning raised by projection (metonymy, metaphor).

Observe that this at the same time expresses the act of choosing based on deliberation, i.e. voluntary choice. The deliberation being that the association evoking tool can be presented to bystanders or left aside at will, as it fits the actor.

This deliberate choice became possible in the turning point where the embedded and bounded event made room for the scheme of detached “object”.

The core of this

- a stimulus not only provokes responding behaviour, it also fires up stored information on the basis of previous similar experiences
 - manipulation of tools brought with it 1) an ability to make a choice and 2) the availability of an implement which might be used as a substitutive stimulus
 - thus the ability to provoke an experience with as content a displacement in space and time
- This is a fact of utmost importance, a fact lifting the technical proficient hominid onto a developmental trajectory on the way to become more of a hominina, a human.

Some noteworthy quotes

- Morford & Goldin Meadow (2001) speak of “displaced reference”
- Gärdenfors (1996) of “detached representation”
- Coolidge et al. “(...) consider the tool showing a permanency in time as the stage on which displaced reference could come into being.” (in Bruner, 2015:182)
- Bickerton stresses the value of displacement as in “I am not suggesting that protolanguage, at its birth, had the unlimited capacity for displacement that forms so salient a feature of language. But the emergence, at some specific time and place, of the first signals that did not refer explicitly to the here-and-now would have represented the crossing of a clearly marked frontier rather than a walk through a gradually changing landscape. (Arbib & Bickerton, 2010:170) and further “There is good reason to choose displacement as the first protolinguistic development (171-2)
- Friston (2005) and Friston et al. (2017) the active inference theory
- Bar et al. (2006) discussing predicative processing
- the idea of mental time travel as offered by Tulving (1984), Suddendorf & Corballis (2007) and by Suddendorf (2013).
- Hockett (1960), linguistic anthropologist, listed design features of language; displacement is mentioned as one only present in humans
- The relation between a tool or object and a sign as something provoking meaning is getting expressed in the following quotes: “...the basic analogy between sign and tool rests on the mediating function that characterizes each of them. They may, therefore, from the psychological perspective, be subsumed under the same category” (Vygotsky in Mind and Society; 1978) and, Holloway (1969/1992:48) “...I will argue that tool making and language are similar, if not identical, cognitive processes...”
- The implement in function as a substituting stimulus is referred to by Dickins (2001) as stimulus equivalence; as a matter of fact it got already mentioned by Plato in Phaedrus when

criticizing writing to be a “hypomnèsis”, an instrument used to recollect, that is to provoke reminiscences.

It will be clear that provoking series of reminiscences this way combined with the ability to make a choice opens a gateway in construing story-like orderings, scenarios, descriptions and explanations.

Building narratives (extract from The Forgotten transition)

The structure of (1) self-initiated (2) mediated manipulation gives rise to (3) imaginative displacement. That driving dynamic in particular the object in its function as substitutive stimulus combined with the ability of making a choice, can not be valued highly enough.

From then on the experience of the world is no longer something that only happens to man. In the new situation he is able to bring experience into play by organizing material means that provoke states of arousal related to events characterized by displacement in space and time.

We find a similar idea in MacWhinney (in Givon and Mall, 2002:239) “In the model developed by MacWhinney (1999a), this first level of perspective taking involves the shift from direct perception and action to stored mental representations of perceptions and actions.”

In this way, an imaginative dimension gets - as an extra - added to the immediate bound experience. MacWhinney again “This is the first step in what I call the ‘ungrounding’ of cognition.”

Provoking self-induced imaginative displacement - and it should be stressed as a by-product of the manipulation of tools, realizes a shift in the development of a different order. It is no less than the stepping stone to what can be appreciated as the typical human culture, i.e. this mode in which imagination performs a pivotal role. It is not only the stepping stone but also the rupture in relation to the type of cognitive abilities of other animals, however close anatomically and genetically they may be. The perceptual and cognitive world of the human becomes very different.

But the magic of this type of experience based on displacement reaches further still. The manipulable object in its function as a substitutive stimulus can become associated to the properties of the manipulating human himself such as speed, force, success during hunting or in defending the group against a threat... This implies that the manipulation of the object in question can provoke a particular state (arousal, intention, directionality...) related to events which took place at a moment in the past located somewhere else. So he can provoke displacements mirroring properties of him-self or of

events which constitute his history of life, in short properties characterizing his self-image and -history⁷. This comes down to narration⁸, narration of the self as a special case.”

In short, the human becomes able to provoke imaginative content in the experience. But this product is not presented as something in isolation, as something completely set apart. It flows together with the outcome of direct perception as such presenting one stream of experience. In the experience it does not make a radical difference. Being present in the office – a tangible fact, and consulting the agenda for meetings to come – an imaginative content, both form one stream in the experience. No one will comment that the meetings planned are not real. Not being different concerns the level of appreciation. Everyone will agree that there is a difference in quality. Thinking of a lemon or taking a bite in the fruit makes a remarkable difference. But while everyone will be aware that the lemon in the imagination is indeed no more than an imagined unit and as an imagination not rich in quality, no one will doubt about the reality of the fruit referred to.

In the day-to-day flow of experience it makes no difference and by this it extends the world with a complete new realm. The cow does not ponder the problem where to graze tomorrow, the experience being closed, bound to the actual and the local. The human can freely consider different opportunities. He is able to decide and initiate to think about happenings to come, recall events from the past. That signifies beyond any doubt enrichment. It has a flipside, which might even be considered a downside. It is that mode or condition coined by MacWhinney as becoming “ungrounded”.

At this point the real subject, even issue, is entering the stage. The previous pages were necessary to understand the situation which might be seen as problematic, but on the other hand precisely exposes the condition characterizing the human.

2. And now the problem

Composing narratives, in particular the character and implications of this ability is the subject to be discussed further. But before starting with **this a few nuances** should be made clear.

⁷ “Quaestio mihi factus sum” in Augustine’s *Confessiones* (X, 33, 50), meaning “I have become a question to myself”, illustrates very strikingly the act in which the manipulator objectified himself.

⁸ For an explanation of the features of narrativity see Bruner (1990); in this context see also Dennett’s “The self as centre of narrative gravity” (1992). For the development of narrativity as the substrate, even cause of the complexity of a full blown language, reference can be made to Barnard (2013).

2.1 Nuances

What is discussed here is the ability to introduce scenes of imaginative nature in the experience and further combining these into simple storylines in a way parallel with what is called protolanguage. It is not about the full-fledged narrative forms modern humans are familiar with. Compare with the quite scant software interfaces from the eighties only offering what was strictly necessary while today the screen bombards the user with a rich visual environment.

Secondly the development sketched has nothing of a short term realisation. Two hundred years separate us from the industrial revolution while the step from Oldowan type tools to Acheul opens an abyss of about one million years or from Oldowan to the appearance of the modern human around three hundred thousand years doubling that window of time to an enormous two million. This should absolutely be kept in mind.

Thirdly, today the function of a narrative is understood as some form of transferring information. In *The Forgotten Transition* (2018) the hypothesis got formulated that the motor driving and maintaining the dynamic of provoking imaginative content in the other was the observable effect. It brought the other (and the actor) in a certain psychic state, a kind of excitement, of ecstasy, of exaltation tending to belong to the realm of the magical and the mythical. But whatever the initial nature by making reference to some event from the past, it also had an informational dimension. The hypothesis mentioned that overtime – over a tremendous span of time – the informational component gained importance.

To round up the **fourth** remark wants to draw the attention to the complex nature of a displacement discussed. It obviously consists of a displacement as experiential content but it shows a particular perspective which is not exactly at stake here. A displacement expresses content which is considered as from a distance – we talk about something as existing over-there, and taking a particular stance – about something, considering it, looking from up to down-there. Distance and consideration are borrowed from out the dynamics involved in the development of tools.⁹ It complicates the subject but again this is not the issue here. The issue is the imaginative formulation and extension of the Umwelt, the world as showing up in experience. This implies particularities and the discussion will exactly about these.

2.2 Omnipresence

Let us begin with a striking observation made by Bickerton

“(…) the capacity to refer to objects or events not physically present — is an all-or-nothing category, like marriage or imprisonment: you’re either married or not, in jail or out of it, and signals either refer exclusively to the here-and-now or can go beyond it. I am not suggesting that protolanguage, at its birth, had the unlimited capacity for displacement that forms so salient a

⁹ Reference to another contribution *Making a world appear*, sub *Manipulation as the basic template for negotiation*.

feature of language. But the emergence, at some specific time and place, of the first signals that did not refer explicitly to the here-and-now would have represented the crossing of a clearly marked frontier rather than a walk through a gradually changing landscape" (Arbib & Bickerton, 2010:168)

It is an all or nothing category!

However the examples which will follow fall short, they offer a hint on how to understand this. Someone who has learned to swim cannot unlearn this skill. Once acquired there is no way back to the previous stage. Today more than ever, we are immersed in the effects and possibilities provided by the global network. Even if it would stop to exist it would be impossible not to ponder its possibilities. An aboriginal in black Africa never been in touch with Western civilization has no clue about the offerings provided by a television set. He does not miss it, it simply does not occur in his world. Until one day... and then there is no way back.

The same goes for the introduction of the ability to provoke imaginative content to one self. Once this step made, there is no way back.

Bickerton rightly observes "the emergence, at some specific time and place, of the first signals that did not refer explicitly to the here-and-now would have represented **the crossing of a clearly marked frontier** rather than a walk through a gradually changing landscape..."

We have transcended a frontier he says but the full impact of this should be made clear.

It is not only a matter of adding an extension – imaginative in kind – to the experience. It is as a matter of fact growing out to an interface encompassing or veiling the whole of experience.

Philosophers should remember Berkeley and Husserl proclaiming that consciousness or the mind provides the very first interface in experiencing the world. Of course we are flesh and blood, we feel pain and joy but whatever we experience - in so far it is not already provoked by a word as a stimulus of second order, it immediately is veiled in words. It is translated into some form of narrative raising a particular semantic field by this providing a particular meaningful interpretation.

One might argue that he feels toothache and only then reports about it. Agreed, but the point to be made is that as soon the pain rises it has become impossible not to word it, aloud or in verbal thought only. I invite anyone trying to think – anything – without immediately if not as first the appropriate words popping up.

Moreover words – triggers of imagination –provoke in a circular movement complete semantic fields. Take the word "milk". No one will in that case think about stuff that makes an engine run but of cows, farms, meadows, butter... etc.

Concluding: as soon as this mode is entered it is impossible to avoid it let alone to roll back the development.¹⁰

2.3. The character of a transition

So far we had the omnipresence, not as something we actually have at our disposal but as a mode of being, a mode of approaching or of negotiating the world.

The second characteristic is about the nature of this transition. The term transition refers to one condition changing into another. One understandably focuses on the opportunities gained far less on what is no longer available and that is precisely what MacWhinney has in mind when writing about *the shift from direct perception and action to stored mental representations of perceptions and actions*” strikingly adding “this is the first step in what I call the ‘ungrounding’ of cognition.”

The ground is getting lost calling into question “what is meant by grounded cognition?”

Let us turn to the prototypical cow again, as a matter of fact to any non human animal. A scheme has been offered earlier summarizing some characteristics of the basic initial basic condition. That comes down to a lived or experienced volume determined by the abilities at the same time confinements of the body by this circumscribing the reach in time and space. This implies a topological situating and a reference to a position on a time scale. The former is easy to understand. It covers a space defined by the reach of the sense organs and of the motor capabilities from within a static position. How far is an organism able to reach with all aspects of the body? Concerning the time dimension, research showed that that perception and action functions optimal in units of up to three seconds while short term memory reaches between twenty to thirty seconds.¹¹ Even if there could be doubt about short term memory being a proper measurement of the lived present, these findings give an indication of the range in time covering what in experience is considered as the present, the so called now-moment. Of course animals are able to make use of heuristics in finding food or drinking resources and given an actual observation foresee where a prey might appear in the field of vision but all these are subjects of a different order altogether. Man is able to consider different options for the future, make a choice and in the end decide not to proceed to execution. Animals do not have these possibilities at their disposal. For an animal conditions of life may be a never ending burden, they are always getting triggered. This might be fired up by internal conditions such as being hungry or by external forces as by the appearance of a threat. Animals are subjects of determinants. Life in all its aspects is controlled heteronomously... no questions asked and in that sense no doubt present.

¹⁰ As discussed in *The Forgotten Transition*, chapter 2.1.1.3.

¹¹ Pöppel, E. 2009. Pre-semantically defined temporal windows for cognitive processing. *Phil Trans R Soc Lond B Biology* 365(1525): 1887-1896.

For the human however plural scenes in imagination open the opportunity of making a choice. It follows from the coherence of objectification, the stance of consideration and the ability to provoke displacement in the realm of imagination. It is a novel and absolutely useful acquisition. However there is a downside. The ability to make a choice creates openness and with this the problem what to choose. It introduces doubt as a condition that did not appear – in that sense even exist – before.¹² The prior unconditional heteronomous determination has vaporized.

It is at this point that the quotes of MacWhinney and Bickerton meet. Cognition is no longer grounded while this is an all or nothing condition.

This stage in the development is crucial.

Recall Husserl mentioning that our first contact with the world unfolds in consciousness or as a manifestation of consciousness. Translated to the context of the actual exposition the displacement taking place in imagination – as an *all* mode – took the position of cognitively being grounded. The human crossed a clearly marked frontier as Bickerton says, he entered a new mode of orientation and understanding of the world, moreover a condition once acquired impossible to unlearn, recall the skill of swimming mentioned.

In short the human has – stress on *has* - to bring forth displacements in the experience, he *has* to built scenarios in order to subsist, he *has* to construct narratives because the heteronomous determined cognitive ground has been lost.

The bottom line is that the way the world is appearing in experience is getting framed by contents of imaginative nature.

Before discussing the distinction between full and minimal semantics, one more clarification should be offered.

Following the line of explanation so far offered one might assume that narratives have to do with projections in time, recalling past events, thinking about the future. There is however more to it. Looking into the garden what we perceive is forced through a verbal conceptual filter. A fragment of raw sensory data is immediately getting translated in verbal concept itself being part of a more encompassing semantic field. One the concept of tree triggered we think of the blossoms and the fruit, maybe recall the moment it got planted, a tree we like to preserve it as resting place for birds etc.

Summary

¹² There occurs a condition in animals too, a fraction of a moment in which the animal seems to be frozen between alternatives such as fight or flight. But this bears more the character of a circuit being shortened the eventual decision made a matter reflex or intuition, not a matter of consideration.

The understanding of the “world” based on embodied sensory input in tension with the condition of the primary motivation has been replaced by an interface using imaginative content framing the understanding. This mode is triggered by secondary stimuli of which the semantic payload is arbitrary. That implies that the interface is a construct of which the meaning is arbitrary. That characteristic does not imply that the meaning is taken as non committal and can be exchanged at random. Estimated as real it acquires the status of being real and as such a guide for behaviour.

3. Full semantics

What has been explained comes down to the following.

- The human cognitive condition phrased in a positive sense is based on openness, in a negative sense it is characterized by uncertainty and doubt.
- This condition of being without grounding has been caused by the introduction of the ability to provoke imaginative content and has at the same time to be answered by it, hence the continuous flow of narratives. It at the same time embodies the deficit and the cure.
- It is an all or nothing condition and once acquired it can not be undone.
- The human understanding of the world is a closed set of storylines and semantic fields based on displacements.
- The implication is that all that is produced by this ability or better still “skill” is a construct, a storyline composed of different scenes.
- The awareness of that fact makes it clear that the human has no one on one corresponding view on the world but on a phenomenon constructed by the skill mentioned.
- That construct repressed negotiation based on inherited and learned behaviour, heteronomous, grounded and closed in nature. It allowed organizing the setting in an autonomous way, taking different narratives into account and this in the perspective of reaching a goal set, the latter also a fruit of that novel ability.
- The conclusion may be short: all is version, storyline or discourse.
- Narration overtook the previous approach still present in non human animals; however the same goal - survival - remains.
- The awareness that all is discourse confronts with the responsibility in relation to the consequences of the adopted version.
- The disappointment – even unwillingness to believe - that this does not provide a truthful view on the world follows from a version with an identifiable historic provenance.

4. Minimal semantics

The idea behind this approach is to reduce the influence of the content of storylines even abstracting these and restrict to listing procedures and strategies in order to realize a certain effect. It would be naïve to assume an absolute condition of abstraction in that domain. Every manipulation is borrowed from a context in which it has meaning. In this case that is mediated manipulation of elements recognized as objects.¹³ That perspective has an important implication. The structure and dynamics of it will define how fluctuations in the environment will be negotiated.¹⁴

The goal of minimal semantics is to make abstraction of interpretations reaching beyond the restrictions mentioned. The range covered is broad. It goes from listing procedures on how to make soup, to how to ride a bicycle and subjects most interesting, on how to realise so called mental achievements like reflection. The endeavour is in line with Lloyd Morgan's advice not to reach for interpretations in the realm of higher psychological processes when answers could be found in workings on lower levels. Agreed, he focused on animals, but the principle can as well get applied in the case of the human.

It offers an alternative for an all too essentialist inspired approach such as for instance offered by Penrose believing that consciousness is a manifestation of the quantum cytoskeletal state and its interplay between quantum and classical levels of activity. This might sound as an extreme illustration but unfortunately that type of approach is common. It is effortlessly accepted that cognition and different kinds of behaviour emerge from the workings of the neural tissue by this neglecting completely the execution of operations in the public area and elements in the environment playing a role essential to such a degree that cognitive states would not be possible without it.

It does not mean that essentialism has no ground – this is actually not the place to engage in that discussion; the point is that it absorbs all attention by this veiling all other possibilities. The expectation is that the focus on manipulations and procedures can offer answers and solutions lying in front of the observer in so far he actually takes the effort to look.

Avoiding historic based interpretations might effectuate a sobering if not purifying effect as the actual literature is still littered with references to intellectual atavisms such as Plato's proposal of the existence of an observer independent reality in the first place, which on top of that lays reach of the human using the right methods. The idea of mind-like or mental working by this tacitly maintaining dualism is another example of an understanding based in the mists of history.

Minimal semantics can be thought to show a degree of family resemblance to process philosophy. In essentialism the substance or the essence of the human for instance remains what it is while sickness is something that accidentally happens to it. From that point of view change

¹³ Reference to footnote 9.

¹⁴ This subject has been discussed in "Hands and imagination" (chapter in "The fifth ape")

is an accident, an attribute, something not really belonging to it. In process philosophy on the contrary there is no question of an unchangeable essence. Thinking in terms of processes which in principle can be described, is the perspective to be taken. Philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Peirce, Whitehead and Deleuze shared that idea.

Minimal semantics is also akin to operationalism as defined by Percy Bridgman. He suggested describing experiments in terms of measurable operations. Minimal semantics wants to confine itself also to a pure technical registration of manipulations executed or to execute in order to raise a particular effect.

5. The necessity of a storyline

The conclusion that the interface instantiating the human condition generates storylines might provoke an all too hastily made judgement. If it is no more than a discourse in principle replaceable by any other, what could be the value?

First of all being human, generating discourses is precisely what opens abilities not present in other animals. That might well be “the” quality to value. Secondly once acquired this mode the human has to do with it. Thirdly being able to offer a scenario implies that humans are able to set their own values and goals. Agreed, storylines around magical mythical elements may not offer the best of options, but proposing a model focusing on the interests of all people while taking available resources and abilities into account might be something to value.

6. The relation to minimal semantics

On closer inspection both modes have their proper advantages.

Apart of the fact that it cannot be avoided which in itself is not an advantage but a fate, full semantics offers the ability to set goals based on values. As such it provides the framework in which the common and individual way of life can be organized.

Minimal semantics by definition can not do that. Its method however delivers an economical and fair result.

In short, the human needs meaning; minimal semantics offers the most appropriate approach.

7. A final quote

“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”¹⁵

This famous quote from Wittgenstein suggests that there are subjects which are not susceptible for discussion. This expression refers to something “that what escapes being spoken about”. Following the line of the meaning expressed, there is somewhere really something existing – a referent - which cannot be spoken about.

However observe the different levels. What is getting expressed is the content of the story (telling that there is something...). It makes it look as if the speaker of this sentence is a neutral invisible instance pointing out xyz. But this very act – because there has to be a speaker otherwise nothing spoken – is also a storyline. All this encompasses the dimension of full semantics. Minimal semantics in turn is about the task to describe the procedures allowing this sentence to be uttered, and further how this very thought “of something which cannot be spoken about” could be brought forth altogether.

¹⁵ 7. Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber musz man schweigen”, (Wittgenstein, 1922, Tractatus)